



An Inexpressible Treasure

THE THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF HOLY BAPTISM

**A REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY AND CHURCH RELATIONS
THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD | NOVEMBER 2018**

Abbreviations used:

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| AC | Augsburg Confession |
| AE | <i>Luther's Works</i> , American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Augsburg and Concordia Publishing House, 1955–). |
| Ap | Apology of the Augsburg Confession |
| FC SD | Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration |
| KW | Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. <i>The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church</i> (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000). |
| LC | Large Catechism |
| LSB | <i>Lutheran Service Book</i> (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006). |
| LSCwE | <i>Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation</i> (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017). |
| SA | Smalcald Articles |
| SC | Small Catechism |

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An Inexpressible Treasure

THE THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF HOLY BAPTISM¹

INTRODUCTION

Early on the first day of the week, breath entered into the body of a man who had been crucified three days earlier. The moment that he inhaled the stale air of the tomb, everything in the universe and human history changed. And now, his body awakened to a new life, he sat up, stood up and left the tomb as the one appointed to be the Lord of God's entire creation. Jesus' resurrection marked the first day of the new creation and is the basis for all the gifts of that new creation.

¹ In 2013 Res. 4-08A, the Synod asked the CTCR to "provide a study of the theology on Holy Baptism that sets forth the scriptural and confessional teaching on this great sacrament of Christian rebirth and offer positive guidance to pastors and congregations regarding proper baptismal practice" (2013 Convention Proceedings, 132–133). The leading phrase in the title of this study, "An Inexpressible Treasure," is a summary of Luther's repeated reference to Baptism in the Large Catechism as, for example, a "treasure ... greater and nobler than heaven and earth" (LC IV 16; KW 458), "an inexpressible treasure" (LC IV 26; KW 459), "a treasure that God gives us and faith grasps" (LC IV 37; LW 461) and "a treasure and medicine that swallows death" (LC IV 43; KW 462).

As Lord, Jesus established Baptism as the entryway into our new life under God's reign.² Through the doorway of Baptism, we are invited to participate in the Lord's

² In this study, the phrases "reign of God" and "reign of Christ" occur frequently. The more familiar New Testament phrases "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" include the truth that God in Christ is actively reigning as the King of the kingdom. The phrases "reign of God" and "reign of Christ" help to express this aspect of the truth of Jesus and the kingdom.

The 2017 edition of *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* defines "the kingdom of God" (for which we continue to pray in the Lord's Prayer) as "the gracious rule and reign of God" (Q. 255, p. 247). This kingdom, says the *Explanation*, "was promised in the Old Testament (Ex. 15:18; 2 SAM. 7:12, 16; Is. 9:7)"; we further note here that God's kingdom was actually present in the Old Testament by way of type and unfolding fulfillment of God's promises. The *Explanation* further unfolds the biblical understanding of the kingdom of God by noting that it was "ushered in by Jesus' incarnation, public ministry, death and resurrection (MARK 1:15; COL. 1:13–14); that it "comes to us here and now by his Spirit through the Word" (LUKE 17:20–21; JOHN 3:5; ROM. 14:17); and that it "will be brought into its fullness when Christ restores all things and returns in glory (DAN. 7:13–14; MATT. 25:34; REV. 11:15)" (Q. 255, PP. 247–248). It is with this fourfold biblical definition in view that the present document speaks of Jesus as "re-establishing" God's gracious reign through His life, death and resurrection and bringing us under that gracious reign through the Sacrament of Baptism as we look forward to Christ's return in glory and the full and final establishment of God's kingdom.

Supper, to read and study the Scriptures and to care for one another as members of the Christian community. Baptism gives the promise that Jesus will ultimately raise us from the dead on the Last Day and give us our eternal inheritance in the new heavens and the new earth. It is not an overstatement to say that Baptism encompasses our entire life in Christ and under Christ.

In order to highlight the significance of Baptism, this study is organized around four parts:

Part 1: “Baptism and the Story of Jesus”³ shows how Baptism fits within the story and mission of Jesus and how its importance for our lives flows out of the life of Christ. Those who are not familiar with this account as related in Holy Scripture need to be helped to see how Baptism fits within this story. Accordingly, Part 1 will focus on the telling of this story as laid out in the Gospels and the Book of Acts. This seeks to provide a coherent and consistent story within which one can account for the entirety of the Christian life that Baptism encompasses.

Part 2: “Baptism: A New Beginning” explores the various ways in which the Bible expresses the benefits of Baptism. To that end, it will focus especially on the New Testament letters, where we find discussions about the meaning and benefits of Baptism for our life. It will also discuss how Baptism places us within the context of God’s story and promises to Israel throughout the Old Testament. This section will focus on themes such as the new life given in Baptism, our adoption as children of Abraham (and hence of God) and our reception into a new community.

Part 3: “The Gifts and Benefits of Baptism” considers the privileges and responsibilities that become ours as members of God’s kingdom through Baptism. It moves from an exploration of the biblical material to a focus on the ways in which we have expressed it within our catechisms. Accordingly, each section is organized around the theological themes with which we are familiar in Martin Luther’s Small Catechism. In brief, Baptism gives us the forgiveness of sins (where there is forgiveness,

there is life and salvation), delivers us from death and the devil, and brings us safely through the final judgment.

Part 4: “The Baptismal Commission” addresses both theological and practical questions that have been raised in the course of the church’s history as it has brought the Gospel into new cultures. To that end, it will discuss elements that are essential for the church’s practice of Baptism in order for it to be a Christian Baptism, as well as certain matters that are not essential but are useful and beneficial for teaching. These themes are roughly organized around Jesus’ Great Commission as found in Matt. 28:18–20.

Addendum: A final section addresses further questions that people may raise about the theology and practice of Baptism.

³ Throughout this document, every reference to “God’s story” or “the story of Christ” assumes that we are talking about events that actually happened and that are recorded for us with complete reliability by the Holy Scriptures. The word “story” is used to communicate that God’s salvation is the true account of events that our God actually performed in history, especially in the deeds and words of the Lord Jesus. God did not save us by communicating a series of ideas; He saved us by actually doing things in Christ and promising saving gifts on the basis of what He did. In that important sense, the Gospel is a narrative, a *story*, *His* story.

1. BAPTISM AND THE STORY OF JESUS

Christians are people who live according to a specific story — a true account, history, His story — about God and His creation⁴ that finds its definitive expression in Jesus Christ. Considering Baptism within that story will help us to appreciate the importance of Baptism and to embrace the life into which Baptism initiates us — a life in which, by His grace and by the power of His Spirit, we can begin to live as our Creator intended. That life includes our daily reception of God’s rich and undeserved gifts, our lives of service as His dear children, our sharing in His delight for His creation, and our reflecting His love and care for it so that everything and everyone in it might flourish.

It is not too difficult to see — whether one is a Christian or not — that the world is far from perfect. At some point, we all cannot help but say, “This is not the way things are supposed to be!” What is true for the world is true for our lives as well. Christians live according to the scriptural story in which Jesus came to put things right — to restore them to the way that God intended them to be. In Jesus’ words and actions as the sinless man (who was also true God), we see human life as God intended it to be lived — a life that is now given and restored to us in Christ through Baptism. As we consider the gift of Baptism within the story of Jesus, we begin with the (highly unexpected) story of Jesus’ own baptism.

⁴ See Joel Okamoto, “God, the Gospel, and Modern Science: Reflections on the Church’s Witness and Message in a Scientific Age,” *Lutheran Mission Matters* 24 (2016): 337–338.

Jesus’ Baptism and the Reign of God

The story of Jesus begins before all things, even before the creation of the world. St. John the Evangelist identifies Jesus as “the Word [who] was with God, and the Word [who] was God,” and the Word through whom all things were made (JOHN 1:1–4). This Word is the only Son of God, begotten of the Father from eternity, who for us and for our salvation “became flesh and dwelt among us” (JOHN 1:14).

Being born of the Virgin Mary, Jesus, the very Son of God, received testimony in a marginal county of the ancient world when a preacher named John appeared in the Judean wilderness with a message that echoed the dire and urgent words of the Old Testament prophets. God was sending someone, His own Son, the Lamb of God, to set things right within His creation. God’s Son would reclaim God’s world and restore it to His gracious reign. So, John announced, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie” (MARK 1:7).

In preparation for the arrival of the one who would re-establish God’s gracious rule, John called upon the people of Israel to take up their calling and live as the chosen people of God through whom He had promised to send a Messiah. To that end, John performed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins to re-orient God’s chosen people to His aims and purposes. Along the way, John warned their spiritual leaders not to stand in God’s way or think that their bloodlines exempted them from the need to repent and produce the fruits of faith. “Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit

is cut down and thrown into the fire” (MATT. 3:9–10).

Then, in a move that caught even John off guard, Jesus, the very one who had come to re-establish the Creator’s reign, came down to the Jordan River to be baptized. This was most unexpected. Why would Jesus, who had no sin, want — much less need — to be baptized? But Jesus said that He and John needed to carry out God’s will that Jesus be baptized (and thus “fulfill all righteousness”).⁵ As Jesus came up out of the water after being baptized, the heavens opened up, the Holy Spirit came down in the form of a dove and the Father’s voice from heaven declared, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (MATT. 3:16–17). In His baptism, Jesus stood in the place of sinful Israel, pointing forward to His death and resurrection for all people.

This baptism also marked the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. Upon being declared God’s Son and His agent for establishing the reign of God over the earth, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where Satan tried to divert Jesus from carrying out His mission (MATTHEW 4). Three times Satan tried, and three times he failed. After those ordeals, Jesus was ministered to by the angels and found peaceful company with the wild beasts (a sign of the messianic age in ISAIAH 11). Refreshed, Jesus embarked upon His mission by calling disciples to follow Him as He took up His teaching and healing ministry.

As John did before Him, Jesus also proclaimed, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (MARK 1:15). The restored reign of God was not only on its way, but had in fact arrived with Jesus’ ministry. Jesus Himself acknowledged this when He spoke at the local synagogue in His hometown. He read aloud this prophecy from Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (LUKE 4:18–19).⁶

Jesus then declared that this prophecy was now fulfilled in Him. From His hometown, Jesus embarked upon His ministry of reclaiming and restoring God’s world, person by person and village by village.

⁵ By being baptized, Jesus aligned Himself with His sinful people (IS. 53:12; JOHN 1:29).

⁶ Jesus’ appropriation of this text, which calls to mind the Jubilee Year (LEVITICUS 25), announces that the ultimate restoration of all land, indeed all creation, to its original relationship with the Creator has been inaugurated in His person and presence.

As Jesus carried out His teaching ministry, He often spoke in parables, in which He painted a picture of what it means to enter the kingdom of God. He likened it to being invited to a feast on the occasion of some great festival. He spoke of a wedding feast given by a king in honor of his son (MATT. 22:1–14). When, on another occasion, Jesus told of a man who issued invitations to a great banquet, someone with whom Jesus was dining exclaimed, “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” (LUKE 14:15). These images presage the words of the angel who, according to John, will one day declare, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (REV. 19:9).

Who is invited to these festivities in the kingdom of heaven? In Matthew 22, the invitations to the king’s sumptuous feast initially go out to the expected invitees — the people of Israel. But many pay no attention to the invitation, thereby dishonoring the king and his son. The king then sends his servants out to invite others (including the Gentiles). In Luke’s account of the wedding feast, the host honors the lowly by inviting them to sit at the head of the table (LUKE 14:10).

In Luke 14, Jesus also speaks of how those invited to a great banquet (the people of Israel) made all kinds of excuses not to attend. The host then urges his servants, “Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame” (LUKE 14:21). These parables ultimately speak about how many in Israel would reject the Creator’s Son, but how God would continue to invite all — even outsiders like the Gentiles — to sit at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Jesus also went about re-establishing God’s gracious reign by doing things that marked Him as God’s Son and Anointed One (LUKE 4:18–19): freeing people from demon possession, healing people from their illnesses, restoring sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, feeding the hungry, raising the dead and even forgiving sins. Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. He associated with those who were regarded as the outcasts of society. All these things provided a glimpse of what the reign of God looks like and what it will again look like on the day when He sets everything right once and for all.

It wasn’t long before organized opposition arose among the religious leaders who liked things the way they were before Jesus arrived. Jesus anticipated this in His parable about the vineyard tenants who refused to give the owner his due. After several attempts to per-

suade the tenants that they needed to abide by the terms of their tenancy, the owner finally sent his son: “They will respect my son!” But the tenants instead saw an opportunity to kill the heir of the estate and seize the vineyard for themselves (MATT. 21:33–46).

The religious leaders looked for a way to have Jesus put to death — an outcome Jesus Himself had anticipated and to which His baptism in the Jordan had pointed: “I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!” (LUKE 12:50). The religious leaders charged Jesus with blasphemy for claiming to be the Son of God and having the authority of God to forgive sins. They ultimately conspired to have Jesus crucified by the Roman authorities, a method of execution reserved for outcasts, slaves and those whose names were to be erased from the annals of history. He had come to restore the reign of God to His people, but “his own people did not receive him” (JOHN 1:11).

Three days later, shocking and surprising everyone, Jesus rose from the grave. This is not to say that His disciples should have been surprised; just as Jesus had foreseen and foretold His death, He had also foreseen and foretold His resurrection. In response to a question about His authority to act on behalf of God, Jesus prophesied: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (JOHN 2:19). Only after Jesus’ resurrection did the disciples realize that Jesus was speaking about “the temple of his body”; then “they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken” (JOHN 2:21–22). Over the next 40 days, Jesus showed Himself to more than 500 people (1 COR. 15:6).

By raising Jesus from the dead, God vindicated Jesus’ claims to be God’s Son and Israel’s Messiah. Peter Berger captures vividly the startling transformation that took place:

God came into the world in the improbable figure of a small-town carpenter turned into itinerant preacher, who was executed as a criminal, despised and abandoned, who was dead and buried — and who then, in a moment that transformed the whole structure of reality, rose from the dead to become the mightiest power in the universe and lord over all human destinies.⁷

Jesus, in the words of Paul, “was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead” (ROM. 1:3–4). Jesus

would now complete His mission of re-establishing the reign of God and renewing His creation.

Baptism: God’s Invitation into the Kingdom of God

Before departing this earth to take up His reign over the world at the right hand of God, Jesus gathered His immediate followers (the 11 disciples) together and spoke to them about His future plans. Jesus had come not only to restore the kingdom to Israel, but also to bring the entire world back under God’s reign. Jesus told them, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (ACTS 1:6–8).

In Matt. 28:18–20, the risen Jesus now sends His disciples out into the world with their “marching orders”:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

He prefaces these “marching orders” with a word of encouragement by declaring that “all authority in heaven and on earth” has been given to Him. In other words, there is no authority that Jesus does not have. As the Son of God and the Lord of creation, Jesus gives His followers a special commission that carried echoes of God’s original commission to His human creatures when He first created the heavens and the earth. In Gen. 1:28, God gave His human creatures the task of sharing in His benevolent reign over the earth — the very reason He made them in His image (GEN. 1:26–28). They were to rule as God did so that everything would continue to live, prosper and flourish.

God declared His entire work of creation, including His human creatures, to be “very good.” It was spectacular! God delighted in this masterpiece that proclaimed His glory (Ps. 19:1). But God’s human creatures wanted to live life on their own terms rather than on God’s terms. In doing so, they ruined God’s creation. It was no longer very good. And God judged human sin by cursing His creation.

But God would not let go of His creation. He sent His Son, Jesus, to restore His creation by bringing it back

⁷ Peter Berger, “Worldly Wisdom, Christian Foolishness,” *First Things* (August/September 1990): 20.

under God's gracious rule and care. To do that, Jesus started where the problem began — namely, with His fallen and rebellious human creatures. Not only would His human creatures be freed from their self-tyranny, but the entire earth would be renewed, refreshed and freed from humankind's destructive rule — just as Isaiah had prophesied (ISAIAH 11: 65; CF. ROMANS 8).

Risen from the dead, Jesus gives His disciples the task of participating in the re-establishment of God's reign over creation by making people followers of Jesus. This had been Israel's role as the chosen people of God. Now Jesus, a descendant of Israel's King David, sends His disciples out as the new representatives of the 12 tribes of Israel to bring *all* nations back to their Creator.

The word "nations" in Matt. 28:19 refers to outsiders, indeed to all people — all those who live outside of God's gracious reign and who are ruled and controlled by destructive desires and forces.⁸ This commission thus looks forward to that long-promised day when God would be worshiped as Creator and Lord by all the nations (Is. 2:1-5; MAL. 1:11-14).

In Matthew 28, Jesus invites "all nations" — including us — to follow Him into the kingdom of God by undergoing a Baptism. In doing so, Jesus establishes Baptism as the Church's missionary or naturalization sacrament. It is the door through which one is admitted into membership within God's kingdom so as to enjoy all the benefits and privileges of those who live under God's gracious reign. It also becomes the basis for taking up our responsibilities as children of God and followers of Christ.

Ten days after Jesus ascended into heaven, His disciples received the Holy Spirit as Jesus had promised (ACTS 1:1-8). Empowered by the Spirit, Peter preached to a large crowd that had gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (ACTS 2:36). This alarmed many of Peter's hearers. Would Jesus now seek vengeance upon them? "When they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'"

Peter replied with good news. "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the

Lord our God calls to himself" (ACTS 2:37-39). Jesus had not come back from the grave in order to seek vengeance — on the contrary! He had come back to finish the task of restoring the creation to God. On that day, 3,000 people were baptized as followers of Jesus.

The disciples carried this news about Jesus' resurrection and His installation as the Lord of creation into the entire known world. Wherever they went, they spoke about how Jesus had come to reclaim, redeem and restore God's creation. The apostle Peter emphasized this very point:

And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name (ACTS 10:42-43).

Similarly, when Paul spoke to the Greeks in Athens, he declared that the Creator who had made all things and had given life to all people has now made Himself known in Jesus Christ:

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead (ACTS 17:30-31).

The Book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament tell the story of how Christians carried out the commission to enlist others as followers of Jesus. They went out from Jerusalem into the Greco-Roman world, to the cities of Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi and even to the imperial capital of Rome. From there, they took the Gospel to Britain and Spain and to the farthest ends of the known world. Everywhere they went, people were made followers of Jesus and citizens of God's kingdom by the baptizing and teaching that Jesus' followers offered.

The New Testament tells us about some of those who were brought to Jesus by Baptism. These include the Ethiopian eunuch whom Philip met on the road (ACTS 8:36-39); the entire household of Cornelius, a Roman centurion (ACTS 10-11); Lydia, "a seller of purple goods" in the city of Thyatira, and her household (ACTS 16:15); a jailor in Philippi and his household (ACTS 16:31-34); Crispus, a ruler in the Jewish synagogue at Corinth (ACTS 18:8); and the household of Stephanas at Corinth (1 COR. 1:16). These households included not only immediate

⁸ Luther's translation of Matt. 28:19 uses the term *Heiden* or, in English, "heathen," where the ESV reads "nations."

family members, but also all who were dependent for their work upon the head of the household.

The apostles not only brought people to Jesus by Baptism and teaching, but they also stayed in contact with them and continued to teach them by visiting them and writing personal letters to them. Jesus' followers gathered around to read these letters and to relive the story of Christ, especially through the meal of remembrance He had left them in His body and blood, the Lord's Supper. Jesus' followers collected these writings into what we call today the New Testament. These texts continue to shape and guide the sharing of the Gospel by Christians down to the present day.

We are part of that ongoing story. Over the course of the past 2,000 years, Jesus' followers have carried out His commission to bring all people into the company of those who will follow Him into the kingdom of God. Most of us who are baptized today are the descendants of those who belonged to "the nations," those who were not part of God's chosen people of Israel. But now we have been made members of God's chosen people by Baptism.

We have not yet reached the end of the story. We will not arrive at its ending until the risen Jesus returns and cleanses His creation once and for all of sin and evil: "Behold, I am making all things new" (REV. 21:5). At that time, we will be raised from the dead to live as co-heirs with Jesus in the new creation and, indeed, as co-rulers in the new creation for God's glory and for the blessing and benefit of God's new creation. The great Lutheran theologian and hymn writer Martin Franzmann expressed it well: "We shall rise from our graves and break through the gates of death when He shall come and cry once more, 'Follow Me!'"⁹

⁹ Martin H. Franzmann, *Follow Me: Discipleship According to Saint Matthew* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), 226.

2. BAPTISM: A NEW BEGINNING

In light of the previous section, “Baptism and the Story of Jesus,” we can see that Baptism is an action or event that marks a new beginning. Jesus’ own baptism marked a new beginning for the world as it launched Jesus on His ministry to rescue and renew God’s creation. His baptism in the Jordan led to His “baptism” of death on the cross (LUKE 12:50). His resurrection marked a new beginning for Him with His installation as the Lord of God’s creation — and with that a new beginning for the entire creation.

Jesus’ commission to baptize all nations is a commission to incorporate all nations into Christ and Christ’s story — the story of how the Creator of heaven and earth sent His Son into the world to rescue and restore His masterpiece. Baptism effects a new beginning in which a person confesses that Jesus has become “my Lord” that I might “be his own” and “live under him” and “serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness”!¹⁰

This new beginning that Christ brought to His creation and that He now makes available to us is described dramatically in the Scriptures in terms of a new birth, a new identity and a new life within a new community: the very Body of Christ.

New Birth and Life

Many in Jesus’ day took pride in being the direct descendants of Abraham by virtue of their bloodlines; they were

citizens of Israel by birth. At times, they viewed their relationship with God as a *right* rather than a *gift*. In doing so, they also took their responsibilities and calling as God’s chosen people for granted. That is why John the Baptist warned the religious leaders of his day that they dare not think their bloodlines absolved them from accountability to their Creator. They, too, must repent and receive God’s merciful forgiveness through the promise of God. For it is not through bloodlines (“not of blood nor ... of the flesh,” JOHN 1:13) but through God’s promises that one is born into the family of Abraham and thus into the family of God.

Jesus’ dramatic encounter with Nicodemus (JOHN 3) is one of the most well-known New Testament accounts of how God’s promise in Baptism makes us members of God’s kingdom, akin to a “birth certificate” that attests to our citizenship within God’s kingdom. In the course of their conversation, Jesus declares: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (JOHN 3:5). Noteworthy here is the connection of water and the Spirit with the imagery of birth. It might recall to our minds the example of when a mother’s water breaks and the child enters into the world; the first thing the child must do is take in a breath of air. The Holy Spirit (referred to as the “Lord and giver of life” in the Nicene Creed) is often identified with the “breath of God,” which in Baptism gives us the breath of eternal life.¹¹

As another example, consider the very first verses of the Bible, which set the table for the subsequent narra-

¹⁰ The Small Catechism, Creed, Second Article (LSCwE, 17). Unless otherwise noted, all translated quotations from the Small Catechism are from LSCwE.

¹¹ The Bible often speaks of the Holy Spirit as giving and renewing life (PS. 104:29–30; IS. 44:1–5; ROM. 8:11).

tive account of God's creation of the world. There we read, "the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters" (GEN. 1:2). The image here is of the Spirit of God soaring and moving over the waters in preparation for the creation of life that takes place over the course of the next six days. The Spirit who once hovered over the waters of creation now hovers over the waters of the new creation in the baptismal font — waters out of which will arise a new creature of God, a baptized child of God.

Jesus was not alone in using the language of new birth or rebirth to describe the new beginning initiated by Baptism. In his letter to Titus, Paul writes:

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, *by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life (TITUS 3:4-7, emphasis added).

Martin Luther speaks of this regeneration as a "washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit" (SC, Baptism). This new birth makes new creatures, members of a new creation.

The apostle Paul makes this same connection in his second letter to the Christians at Corinth: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 COR. 5:17). Paul's language, "in Christ," points us to Jesus who has become the second or new Adam, the head of a new human community. By His conception and birth, Jesus entered the world as the second Adam who had come to undo the damage caused by the first Adam's rebellion.¹² As the new Adam, Jesus reveals what it means to be a human creature who lives in total dependence upon the Creator and in complete accordance with the will of the Creator. Baptism now "births" us into this new life as God's children.

Baptism as new *birth* and new *life* is one of the most vivid pictures painted in the New Testament about what takes place in Baptism. Just as our birthdays are times of celebration marking the entrance of our life into this world, so Baptism marks our entrance into a new life, an eternal life in God's promised new creation. To com-

memorate this event, Christian parents are often encouraged to celebrate the baptismal birthday of their children in addition to their natural birthday.

We Are Made Children of Abraham through Baptism

In order to better appreciate how Baptism makes us children of God and members of His kingdom, we need to locate this sacred act within the wider story of God and Israel. There we learn that we become members of God's kingdom by becoming *members of God's chosen people of Israel*. For it is through His chosen people, Israel, that God has chosen to rescue and renew His creation. This is why the ancestry of Jesus as set forth in His genealogies is so important.

The very first verse of the New Testament — in the Gospel of Matthew — opens with the words, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (MATT. 1:1). This verse makes the point that Jesus is not only Israel's promised Messiah from the line of Israel's greatest king, David, but He is also the offspring of a promise made to Abraham long before. The Gospel of Luke traces Jesus' genealogy back even further, namely, to the creation of Adam and Eve (LUKE 3:23-38). Interestingly, Luke's account of Jesus' lineage is given immediately after His baptism, when God declared "You are my beloved Son" at the start of Jesus' public ministry as Israel's Messiah.

Jesus' genealogies tell the story of how the Creator remained faithful to His beloved (and unfaithful!) people from the moment that Adam and Eve rejected God's motivations and intentions for them. God was determined to make His creation "very good" again and to do so through the very human creatures who had ruined it. To that end, God chose Abraham, a relative nobody, and promised, "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (GEN. 12:3). He told him, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." And then he said, "So shall your offspring be" (GEN. 15:5-6). After this, God provided for the incorporation of such offspring, even as infants, into the identity of God's covenant people through the sign of circumcision on the eighth day (GEN 17:9-11).

God ultimately carried out that promise to Abraham through one particular descendant who came from the line of King David as heir to that throne (GAL. 3:16). That person was Jesus Christ. Paul connects Abraham's story

¹² German theologian Edmund Schlink expressed it this way: The "incarnation is the hidden beginning of the new man." Edmund Schlink, *The Doctrine of Baptism*, tr. Herbert J. A. Bouman (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 83.

with Christ's story and shows how we as Christians have become children of Abraham, the chosen people of God:

For in Christ Jesus you are *all sons of God*, through faith. For as many of you as were *baptized* into Christ *have put on Christ*. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. *And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise* (GAL. 3:26–29, emphasis added).

God's promise to Abraham now extends from Jesus (by virtue of His authority as the Son of God) to all those who were not blood descendants of Abraham. In other words, through Baptism we “outsiders” (the nations) have become the children of Abraham — and thus children of God.

We Are Adopted as Children of God through Baptism

God referred to the people of Israel, the children of Abraham, as *His son*. When the descendants of Abraham found themselves enslaved in Egypt, God sent Moses with these words for Pharaoh: “Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, ‘Let my son go that he may serve me’” (EX. 4:22–23). Centuries later, God would call His true and greater Son, Jesus, out of Egypt in fulfillment of an ancient prophecy (MATT. 2:13–15, 19–23; HOS. 11:1–2). Baptism now makes us children of God by giving us a share in Jesus' own sonship as the only begotten Son of the Father. By our Baptism into Christ, we, too, become children of God. Just as God announced at Jesus' baptism that this was His beloved Son, so now in our Baptism He announces that we, too, are His beloved children.

Paul makes this point emphatically to the Christians in Galatia regarding their adoption as children of God:

When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might *receive adoption as sons*. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “*Abba! Father!*” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an *heir* through God (GAL. 4:4–7, emphasis added).

Through Baptism then, we are given the blessings and inheritance of the children of God. Two points are especially worth making here regarding this adoption.

First, as Baptism brings us into God's family, it also comes with an invitation to join Him for the family meal (“great banquet”). Luke records that immediately after many were baptized upon taking Peter's sermon to heart, “they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (ACTS 2:42). We, the baptized, come together around the teaching of the apostles and gather at the table of the Lord's Supper (“the feast of victory for our God,” LSB 155, 171). The Lord's Supper is for the baptized, for they share in the Lord's victory over death.

Second, Baptism entitles us to approach and address our Creator as “Father.” When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, He did not give them a template for prayer that was addressed to Himself. Instead, Jesus taught them to build on His relationship with the Father by praying: “*Our Father* who art in heaven.” Martin Luther notes that with these words, “God tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children, so that with all boldness and confidence we may ask Him as dear children ask their dear father” (SC, Lord's Prayer).

The story of Christ as the Son of God provides the pattern for our new life with God. This pattern finds expression in the three articles of the baptismal creed known as the Apostles' Creed:

For in all three articles God [the Father] himself has opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart and his pure, unutterable love. For this very purpose he created us, so that he might redeem us and make us holy, and moreover, having granted and bestowed upon us everything in heaven and on earth, he has given us his Son and his Holy Spirit, through whom he brings us to himself. (LC II 64; KW 439)

We, in turn, now approach God in confident prayer through His Son, Jesus, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who teaches us to pray “in Jesus' name.”

For as we explained above, we could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrible judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit. (LC II 65; KW 439–440)

As God's agent for the new creation, Jesus reconciles us to God so that we can see the love in the Father's heart

for us and His loving face beaming upon His beloved creation.¹³

Baptism Makes Us Members of a New Community

Not only do we begin a new life with God as our Father through Baptism, but we begin a new life with all the members of God's family in which we now find ourselves. By becoming children of Abraham (and thus children of God), we become numbered among the (innumerable!) offspring that God promised to Abraham. These descendants of Abraham include not only the Israelites who lived by faith in God's promise but also *all* believers scattered throughout the world. Baptism incorporates us into a community that reaches back thousands of years and that extends around the entire world. We know that community today as the Church, the new Israel, the Body of Christ.

Paul draws on this theme and deepens its meaning when he writes to the Christians in Ephesus: "There is one body and one Spirit ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (EPH. 4:4-5). He expands on it further in his letter to the Christians at Corinth:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and all were made to drink of one Spirit (1 COR. 12:12-13).

In Baptism, we are united with Christ and thereby also united with every other baptized Christian. We share the same promises and the same hope as part of the same Body of Christ. Herein lies our indissoluble unity as Christians.

Paul uses Baptism's incorporation of Christians into the one Body of Christ as a basis for urging the unruly Corinthians (they provide an especially good case study!) to get along with each other, to bear each other's burdens and to live in peace with one another. Since Baptism makes us members of God's family, we are called to look after each other — even if we do not always know each other personally or like each other very much! Paul reminds the Corinthians that even as members of one body, they have different God-given interests and talents. All of these gifts and talents, in one

way or another, serve to build up and edify the one Body of Christ (1 CORINTHIANS 12).

Love guides our use of these gifts for each other, as Paul writes in his famous chapter on love (1 CORINTHIANS 13). In the early years of the church's growth, we see that love put into action as Gentile Christians around the world collected money for the Jewish Christians in Judea suffering under a famine (ACTS 11:27-30). The apostle Paul reminds his readers throughout Galatia to do the same for each other: "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (GAL. 6:10). This was one of the features that stood out about Christians within the ancient world and prompted pagans to exclaim, "Look how they love one another!" This is what life under the restored reign of God looks like in practice.

Baptism's formation of Christians into a new community carries with it significant implications for our practice of Baptism. Ordinarily, it is most fitting to perform Baptism within the context of the entire assembled congregation. A public Baptism highlights the rite as an act of adoption by which we are welcomed and incorporated into a new family and community. The rite of Baptism itself emphasizes this when the congregation welcomes the newly baptized "in Jesus' name as our brother/sister in Christ, that together we might hear His Word, receive His gifts, and proclaim the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light" (LSB 271).

¹³ Henry W. Reiman, "Luther on Creation: A Study in Theocentric Theology," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 24, no. 1 (January 1, 1953): 34.

3. THE GIFTS AND BENEFITS OF BAPTISM

In his *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther asks, “What benefits does Baptism give?” He answers: “It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare” (SC, Baptism). Luther’s list provides a handy way to organize our reflection on the various gifts and benefits that are promised and delivered to us in this new life with God and His people.

Baptism Promises the Forgiveness of Sins

Today, it is easy to take the language of “forgiveness” for granted or to empty it of its power by turning it into a platitude. To get a better sense of how life-altering forgiveness can be, consider this: When we forgive someone, we are promising them that we will not allow the past to determine our future relationship with them. So when God forgives us, God promises us that He will not allow our self-centeredness to determine or affect our life together with Him as we move forward into the future. The past is ancient history. God has buried the past in the depths of the sea (MICAH 7:19) and no longer remembers it (IS. 38:17; 43:25; PS. 103:12). Our relationship with God (and with each other) is given a fresh start.

We can see this particularly with respect to Israel’s relationship with God. Time and time again, Israel failed to live as God’s chosen people by turning in upon themselves. Each time they turned their back upon God, they fractured their relationship with Him. This could only be repaired by God Himself and His forgiveness. Time and

again, God did just that. He forgave His people and gave them a new start.

Given the crucial importance of forgiveness for our relationship with God and others, it should not surprise us that the New Testament speaks about *Baptism* as being administered for the forgiveness of sins. Peter highlights this connection in his sermon on the day of Pentecost. When the assembled crowd realized that the one they had wanted to be crucified and killed had just been brought back to life, they wondered, “What shall we do?” (ACTS 2:37) Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (ACTS 2:38).

The Nicene Creed also emphasizes this connection between Baptism and forgiveness when it confesses that we believe in “one Baptism for the remission of sins.” “One Baptism” highlights the dramatic once-and-for-all nature of Baptism that transitions us to a totally new and wondrous life and future. The “forgiveness of sins” tells us what is so wondrous about it: “Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation” (SC, The Sacrament of the Altar). The past is the past. God will never dredge up the past and throw it into our face.

God’s forgiveness not only has the power to re-establish our relationship with Him, it also has the power to give us a clear conscience again. It enables us to feel clean again — on the basis of His sure and certain Word and promise — so that we need not feel shame before God and seek to hide from Him as Adam and Eve did

(GEN. 3:8–10). This gift of forgiveness in Baptism is highlighted by the vivid image of washing.

As God’s chosen people, the citizens of Israel were to lead holy lives: lives lived in congruence with God’s will for His creation and dedicated to His purposes within His creation. When God’s people failed to do so — that is, when they sinned — it was as though they had chosen to go out and roll around in the mud and in the muck of their own filth. They need to be washed clean before coming back inside (see Ps. 24:3–4).

It is in this context that the most basic meaning of the word “baptize” moves into the foreground. In its literal sense, the New Testament word “baptize” indicates a washing with water for the purpose of cleansing. In the ancient world, the word was used for washing tables and dishes — and people. The imagery of baptizing with water picks up these ideas and applies them to us as an act that washes us and cleans us up so that we might be presentable to God and thus be able to attend God’s festival banquet.

When the apostle Paul recounted his pre-conversion life in which he persecuted and killed followers of Jesus, he recalled how Ananias told him: “And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (ACTS 22:16). Later, Paul uses this same imagery in writing to the Christians at Ephesus: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he [Christ] might sanctify her, *having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word [Baptism]*, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (EPH. 5:25–27, emphasis added).

In the New Testament, the washing of Baptism often comes with the reminder that it is good to be clean — coupled with the encouragement: Don’t go getting dirty again! For example, Paul tells the Christians in Corinth: “And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 COR. 6:11). This verse comes on the heels of reminding them about their former sin-filled lives outside of Christ (“such were some of you” in 1 COR. 6:1–11). It then provides the basis for Paul’s exhortation to live as “[temples] of the Holy Spirit.” He urges them, “So glorify God in your body” (1 COR. 6:12–20).

The gift of the forgiveness of sins promised us in Baptism brings us into such an intimate relationship with God our Father that we may always run to Him for for-

giveness. This is why Christians often see confession and absolution as an important way in which we live out our baptismal relationship with God. When we fail to live as the new people of God (and that does and will happen!), we can come to God with the confession and request: “Please take these sins and get them out of my sight. I don’t want them anymore!” In response to this plea, God speaks His word of forgiveness over and over again within the Church: “I forgive you!” This is done most commonly in public in the context of the Divine Service, but it can also take place in personal, private, one-on-one situations (see SC, Confession and LSB, pp. 292–293).

Baptism Promises Freedom from Death and the Devil

Nothing marks the dramatic break with one’s past life more decisively than death. It brings to an end everything that preceded it. At the same time, nothing marks the dramatic beginning of a new life more than the resurrection of the body. Thus, the death and resurrection of Christ is one of the most vivid images used by Paul to speak about the transition that takes place in Baptism. Jesus Himself made this connection when He linked His baptism by water in the Jordan with His baptism by death on the cross at Golgotha.¹⁴

Paul often uses this imagery of death and new life to compare the consequences of Adam’s rejection of the Creator’s will with the results of Christ’s obedience to His Father.

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned (ROM. 5:12).

For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many (ROM. 5:15).

Paul highlights this contrast again in his great chapter on the resurrection: “For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 COR. 15:21–22). What does this mean for us?

On the one hand, Christ’s death marks the beginning of the end of death — death that had ruled the world from the time of Satan’s deception and Adam’s rebellion. To make it clear that He would not give up on His creation despite the devil’s attempt to usurp His reign and

¹⁴ Schlink, *The Doctrine of Baptism*, 24.

take over His creation, God made a promise that a descendant of Eve (namely, Jesus) would crush the head of the serpent and undo the curse of death (GEN. 3:15–19).

On the other hand, Christ's resurrection marks the breaking in of a bright new future resulting from Christ's obedience and subsequent installation as Lord at the right hand of God. As Martin Luther puts it, "[We] are presently in the dawn of the age to come."¹⁵ The dawn is not yet the full light of the noonday sun. The sun still lies below the horizon, but its light is bouncing off the sky and beginning to illumine the land. The full light of day is on its way.

In Romans 6, Paul provides us with the most comprehensive treatment of how Baptism interweaves our story with Christ's:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a *death like his*, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his (ROM. 6:3–5, emphasis added).

The "death" we undergo in Baptism is "like his"¹⁶ in that "our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin" (ROM. 6:6–7). We are set free from the life of death that has ruled the world since Adam.

Paul makes it clear, however, that this was not the end of the story. For we were buried with Christ in order that we might be raised with Christ into a new life and a new world:

Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (ROM. 6:8–11).

Paul's primary emphasis here is that Baptism unites us with Christ's *resurrection*. For if Christ had not been raised, there would be no reason to talk about the significance of His death — much less the importance of Baptism.

Dying and rising with Christ in Baptism serves as the basis for many of Paul's exhortations about what it means for baptized Christians to live a new life under the lordship of Jesus:

Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life (ROM. 6:13).

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (COL. 3:1–4).

Martin Luther extends the significance of this once-and-for-all burial and resurrection that takes place in Baptism by suggesting it as a daily pattern for the Christian life. He urges that our old self-centered life "should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever" (SC, Baptism). As we discussed in the previous section, this takes place through the confession of our sins (in which we die to sin) and the reception of forgiveness (in which we are given a new and fresh lease on life).

And what of the old evil foe, the devil? Paul speaks to this reality as well. In Christ's triumphant resurrection from the dead, He laid waste to Satan's power to accuse and destroy us, taking captive all evil spiritual powers against us. We participate in this triumph because we have been joined to Christ in our Baptism, that is, we have died and been made alive:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having

¹⁵ Quoted in Oswald Bayer and Thomas H. Trapp, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 108.

¹⁶ Schlink, *The Doctrine of Baptism*, 48.

forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him (COL. 2:11–15).

Though Satan continues to tempt us with his lies, he cannot overcome the power of God's baptismal promise, nor can he destroy the offer of new life that is ours in Christ Jesus. The serpent of old has been de-fanged by the Lord Jesus.

This significance of Baptism does not end there. Baptism also anticipates and prefigures our bodily resurrection on that great and glorious day when Christ will return to gather our bodies from the dust, fashion them anew and breathe new life — eternal life — into them. Paul brings this out in his great resurrection chapter:

So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power (1 COR. 15:42–43).

For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”
“O death, where is your victory?
O death, where is your sting?” (1 COR. 15:53–55).

Even as the final victory over death will emerge on the Last Day in all of its glory, so will the defeat of Satan also be complete and final. On that great day, we will finally see and realize the full truth and power of Paul's words in Romans 8:

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died — more than that, who was raised — who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (ROM 8:31–39).

On the Last Day, Christ's work of new creation will be complete. All who are baptized and live by faith under the lordship of Jesus will be set free from both death and the devil forever. God's work of death and resurrection, accomplished in Jesus and granted to us by faith through Baptism, will reach its final goal. Baptism points us to and brings us to the new creation.

This accent on Baptism as new creation has found expression symbolically in a number of ways within the church's practice of Baptism. Baptismal fonts, for example, are often fashioned with eight sides. This reflects the ancient tradition of seeing Easter as the eighth day of creation — the first day of the new creation that was ushered in by Christ's resurrection.

Baptism Promises Safe Passage through the Final Judgment

The ministry of Jesus began with the announcement that the coming kingdom of God was “at hand.” This meant that two events were about to take place. First, Christ would “clean house” and sweep out all sin and evil from His creation. This was good news for all those who had suffered at the hands of God's enemies — enemies who sought to relegate God to the dustbins of history. Second, Christ would restore and renovate His creation and make all things new again (REV. 21:5). This, too, was good news for those who longed for the peace and prosperity that God's reign promised to bring.

These two dimensions of the same event are expressed by Peter with reference to the flood and Noah's ark as an analogy for Baptism, noting God's use of the power of water both to destroy and to save.

Baptism, which corresponds to this [Noah's ark and the flood], now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, author-

ities, and powers having been subjected to him
(1 PETER 3:21–22).

What happened to us in Baptism, says Peter, will ultimately happen to the heavens and the earth. Just as the flood swept the earth clean of sin and evil in Noah's day, fire will purge the earth of sin and evil on the day of Christ's return. The old, dirty, moldy garments of sin will be burned off (like purifying silver of dross, IS. 1:25). As they are destroyed, the new and glorious heavens and new earth will emerge (2 PETER 3:7–13).

This theme of rescue and renewal recalls the central event in the life of Israel: the Exodus. The armies of Egypt were destroyed by the collapsing walls of water in the Red Sea while the people of Israel were led safely through that destruction and ultimately brought to the Promised Land. The passage through the water formed the transition from their old life under slavery to their new identity as those who were "free to be people of God."¹⁷

Paul connects this event with Baptism. "For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 COR. 10:1–2). In a similar way, Baptism promises us safe passage through the judgment that awaits every person (EPH. 2:3; 1 THESS. 1:10; MATT. 3:7). In Baptism we are rescued from God's wrathful judgment against sin as we are led by Jesus into the new creation. There we live as the human creatures that God intended us to be "in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as [Christ] is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity" (SC, Second Article).

Not only does Jesus promise to lead us into the "promised land" of the new creation, but He promises to share with us His reign. As the second Adam, Jesus exercises the dominion that the first Adam abdicated by virtue of his rebellion. Our inheritance as the descendants of Abraham and the children of God thus includes the privilege of becoming co-rulers with the second Adam, Jesus. In being restored as God's human creatures, we are restored to a benevolent reign with Christ who is the perfect image of God.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved — and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (EPH. 2:4–6).

The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him (2 TIM. 2:11–12).

But over what will we rule with Christ? With the promise of our restoration as creatures made in the image of God and the restoration of the world as God's good creation, we will reacquire the benevolent dominion over the new earth for which the entire creation now groans in travail.

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (ROM. 8:20–21).

The creation longs for the day when it is set free from the tyrannical and domineering rule of sin, death and Satan and comes under the benevolent rule of God's children. In short, those baptized into Christ, the crucified and risen Lord, will inherit the earth (MATT. 5:5).

¹⁷ "This Is the Feast," *LSB*, 155, 171.

4. THE BAPTISMAL COMMISSION

Christ's "Great Commission" to His followers in Matthew 28 not only provides the basis for the church's teaching about Baptism, but it also provides guidance for the church's practice of Baptism. To put it succinctly: Baptism is only the Baptism that Jesus mandated when it is carried out in accordance with Jesus' words:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (MAT. 28:18–20).

On the basis of the authority vested in Him by virtue of His resurrection, Jesus sends the disciples out into the world with two key tasks. First, they are to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Second, they are to teach Jesus' followers everything that Christ has commanded.

Who Is to Be Baptized?

In the early years of the church's growth, since so many adults were being converted to the faith, most Baptisms were of adults who brought with them their entire households. This normally consisted not only of parents and children but also those who were dependent on the household for their income and livelihood. Our baptismal rites today (in *LSB*) still reflect that early church missionary context of reaching out to adults, particularly

with respect to the questions that are asked of the one being baptized. As Christianity grew and spread, and since more and more children were born into Christian families, Baptisms of infants and young children became more common (for the promise belongs to them as well). That, therefore, has been the norm in Lutheran churches until recently, as demographic and cultural shifts are moving the church back into a more "missionary" posture in many ways and places. As we were brought to Jesus in Baptism, we now bring our infants, children and families to Jesus that they might also become His followers and citizens in God's realm.

How Is the Water to Be Applied in Baptism?

Strictly speaking, the word *baptize* means to "wash with water," whether by immersing, pouring, splashing or sprinkling. As an act of washing, the Bible does not say how much water one must use or how one should apply the water. It simply says, "baptize" or "apply water."

That said, reasons can be (and have been) given for applying the water in particular ways. For example, the practice of immersing a person beneath the water vividly captures the symbolism of being buried (beneath the water) with Christ and rising up with Christ (ROM. 6:1–4). Thus Luther himself notes that Baptism is the act or ceremony that "consists of being dipped into the water, which covers us completely, and being drawn out again" (LC IV 65; KW 464–465). Some maintain that Baptisms during Jesus' day took place by immersing a person

completely beneath the water. Others argue that such was probably not the case since the waters in the river Jordan were often too low to allow for immersion. Both positions are arguing from silence. The Bible simply does not say, which is good and sufficient reason for the church not to insist on a particular mode of Baptism.

Ordinarily, we in the Lutheran church have performed Baptisms by sprinkling or pouring water over the head of the person being baptized. Practically, this would seem to be most appropriate for baptizing infants and very young children. Nevertheless, it would also seem wise to use the water liberally when sprinkling it or pouring it so as to highlight that this is the (earthly!) means through which God Himself has chosen to work: This is the water over which God's Spirit hovers and into which He has placed His Triune name. As Luther once said: "Through the Baptism in the Jordan of Your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, You *sanctified and instituted all waters* to be a blessed flood and a lavish washing away of sin" (*LSB 269*, emphasis added). Let the water splash back down into the font!

In any case, the manner in which the water is applied or the amount of water applied is not a matter of central importance for the practice of Baptism and has no impact on its blessings and benefits. Water *alone* does not make any baptism the Baptism about which Christ speaks. Put another way, Baptism is not *simply* a washing with water. There is much more to it (see below)!

What Is the Significance of God's Name in Baptism?

The application of water is a *Christian* Baptism when it is performed in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as Jesus instructed. These words recall Jesus' own baptism, at which God's voice was heard to say, "This is my beloved Son." At that time, God also confirmed that Jesus was authorized to speak for Him by sending His Spirit (as a dove) to rest upon Him and consecrate Him for His God-given mission. Just as who *we* are is defined by our relationships and our life story, so also God's story and relationships define who He is.

The name "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" identifies the story of how the Creator of the universe, out of love for the world, sent His Son into the world to restore it. That Son now reigns at the right hand of God as the Lord of creation. Together with His Father, He has sent the Holy Spirit into the world to bring people under His gracious rule and keep them there until the day that Jesus returns

to renew His creation and welcome us into it by raising us from the grave. To be baptized into *this* particular name brings us into the salvation that is accomplished only in *this* particular story.

As the baptismal water washes over us, God places His name upon us. He thereby claims us as His own and takes us under His gracious rule. We become identified with His name and are incorporated into His story of creation's rescue and restoration. By placing His name upon us in Baptism, God welcomes us and makes a remarkable promise to us: He will be ours forever, and we will be His forever.

Therefore, when Luther asks, "What is Baptism?" he responds that Baptism is "water included in God's command and combined with God's word" (SC, Baptism). One might say that with His command to baptize, Jesus takes hold of the earthly element of water and embeds into it the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The water and the name cannot be considered apart from one another.¹⁸ This is why Luther insists that "faith clings to the water" and explains that this means faith "trusts this *word of God in the water*" (SC, Baptism, emphasis added).

What Is the Purpose of God's Promises to Us in Baptism?

In this study, we have talked much about the promises that God makes to us in Christ and in Baptism. There is a good reason for that. The promises of God in Baptism are what make this washing of water and Word a joyous Gospel event! This point cannot be overestimated. We too often understand the Gospel only or primarily as the story *about* the life and work of Jesus Christ. This story includes His teachings, His conversations, His interactions with people, His miracles and the like. Defining the Gospel in this way is certainly understandable when we read the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. After all, this is what they talk about. They are "biographies" of Christ. But they are also much more than that.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell the story of Christ for the specific purpose of conveying God's *promise* to us. That promise is what makes this story good news for us. To speak more precisely, the Gospel

¹⁸ David Scaer speaks about the "indissoluble link" between the Word and "every drop of the baptismal water" in "The New Translation of Luther's Small Catechism: Is It Faithful to Luther's Spirit?" in *Luther's Catechisms — 450 Years: Essays Commemorating the Small and Large Catechisms of Dr. Martin Luther*, ed. David Scaer (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1979), 32–40.

is not only a story; it is a story that comes with a promise for us. We might express it this way: The Gospel = Story + Promise. The story of the Gospel is not “good news” without the promise.¹⁹ The Gospel is not simply that Jesus died. The Gospel is not simply that Jesus rose from the dead. The Gospel is that this Jesus, who has died and has been raised from the dead, now *promises* that we are His forgiven people, and that we will rise bodily from the dead one day and be invited into His new creation. That is what makes it good news!

When we see the Gospel as a promise, we can better understand the nature of faith. The promise of Christ calls for faith. That is to say, it calls for and elicits a trust that Christ will keep His promises to us just as He kept His promise to rise from the dead (JOHN 2:19–22). This is what makes the Christian faith unique and distinctive from every other religion or form of spirituality in the world. We believe the promise of a man risen from the dead that He will raise us from the dead and give us a place in His kingdom. And because He has risen from the dead just as He had promised, we now trust Him to keep His promise to us! And so John writes in his Gospel, “These [things] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (JOHN 20:31).

The key to understanding the nature of faith thus lies with understanding the nature of a promise. This is why the example of Abraham’s faith is so important for Paul:

In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.” He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness” (ROM. 4:18–22).

In light of Paul’s account, we might identify and consider four characteristics of God’s promise to Abraham.

First, a promise depends upon the reliability and trustworthiness of the one making it. Abraham believed

God because he was convinced “that God was able to do what he had promised.” We can count on Jesus to keep His promises because He rose from the dead ... just as He had promised to do (MATT. 16:21; 28:6; LUKE 24:6–8).

Second, the promise is personal. God makes a promise directly to Abraham. It is not an abstract newsfeed determined by anonymous algorithms as to which news we receive. In the Gospel, God addresses each one of us personally. “I baptize *you*. ... I forgive *you*. ... The body and blood given for *you*. ...”

Third, a promise calls for and gives rise to faith. The whole point of making a promise is to create or strengthen someone’s faith and thus give them hope and joy about their future. After all, is that not why we make promises to one another? To reassure? To give confidence? Of course!

Finally, the promise opens up a new future. God makes a promise to Abraham that boggles the mind (given both his and Sarah’s advanced ages) — namely, that he will have more descendants than the number of stars in the sky. And now Jesus promises that we will be given a place within the new creation among all the spiritual descendants of Abraham.

Here we might consider one of Martin Luther’s favorite analogies for faith. When a bride and groom stand before the altar and make their vows or promises to each other, they are creating and opening up a new future together. “I will be with you from here till we die ... in sickness and in health.” Why do they speak these promises to each other? They do so for the purpose of eliciting and strengthening the faith of their beloved: “You will not go through life alone.” Promise and faith thus belong together.

Christ commits Himself to us and binds Himself to us with His promise; we bind ourselves to Christ by believing that He will keep that promise. Christ says: “You are mine”; the Christian says: “I am yours.” Promise and faith unite us to Christ. So God’s promise opens up a new future for us. We will rise from the grave one day with a restored body that will never again see corruption, and we will live in the new creation, for Christ says (promises!): “Behold, I am making all things new” (REV. 21:5).

Like marriage, Christian discipleship (living by faith in Christ) is a lifelong endeavor. As Christ’s disciples, we live by the promises of God, not knowing what the future may hold for us with regard to the things here on earth that we care about: our health, our relationships, our jobs, our family, our children, our country. Think about

¹⁹ For a discussion of the Gospel as promise within the Lutheran Confessions, see Charles P. Arand, “The Gospel in the Lutheran Tradition” in *God’s Two Words: Law and Gospel in the Lutheran and Reformed Traditions*, ed. Jonathan A. Linebaugh (Eerdmans, 2018), 65–83.

it: As Christians, we go through life *by faith in a promise*. In the end, the warrant for our faith in that promise cannot be found in any empirical evidence or proof within the world. Our faith in God's promise will only be vindicated on the Last Day when Jesus returns and raises us (who have died) from the dead.

We should emphasize, however, that even though Christ's promises in Baptism call for and engender faith, faith *does not make* this particular washing with water a Baptism. Only God's name and promise do that. Faith may precede Baptism (as with adult converts); faith may be created in and through Baptism; faith may be sustained through the promise after Baptism. But it is the promise of God that is central in each case. Here Martin Luther draws the parallel between our going to the Lord's Supper and our going to be baptized:

I myself, and all who are baptized, must say before God: "I come here in my faith and in the faith of others, nevertheless I cannot build on the fact that I believe and many people are praying for me. Instead, I build on this, that it is your Word and command." In the same way I go to the Sacrament [of the Altar] not on the strength of my own faith, but on the strength of Christ's word. I may be strong or weak; I leave that for God to decide. This I know, however that he has commanded me to go, eat, and drink, etc., and that he gives me his body and blood; he will not lie or deceive me.

Thus we do the same with infant Baptism. We bring the child with the intent and hope that it may believe, and we pray God to grant it faith. But we do not baptize on this basis, but solely on the command of God. Why? Because we know that God does not lie. My neighbor and I — in short, all people — may deceive and mislead, but God's Word cannot deceive. (LC IV 56–57; KW 463–464)

These statements simply follow Paul's argument about Abraham and his faith in the promise. The God who made that promise to Abraham was the one "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (ROM. 4:17). A few words later we read, "No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised" (ROM. 4:20–21).²⁰

²⁰ Notice how similar the last line of the Romans passage is to the argument made by the Formula of Concord for confessing the presence

of the body and blood in the Lord's Supper. It begins by asking, "Who gives this command and promise?" Then the Formula of Concord proceeds to say, "This reliable, almighty Lord, our creator and redeemer Jesus Christ, spoke these words ..." (FC SD VII 43–44; KW 600). In each of these instances, the argument is rooted in the character of God and the faithfulness of God.

Who Performs the Baptism within the Service?

Within our Lutheran tradition, we believe that when Christ gave His disciples this baptismal commission to baptize, He gave it by extension to all of His followers. In other words, Christ gave this commission to all Christians. Thus, a statement adopted by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in 1932 states:

Christ Himself commits to all believers the keys of the kingdom of heaven, Matt. 16:13–19, 18:17–20, John 20:22, 23, and *commissions all believers to preach the Gospel and to administer the Sacraments*, Matt. 28:19, 20; 1 Cor. 11:23–25. (italics added)

Ordinarily, the church has selected someone from its midst to carry out Baptisms on behalf of all and, by extension, on behalf of Christ. This is because God has established a particular office to preach and administer the Sacraments publicly within the congregation. So when the pastor administers the Baptism, he does so on behalf of the congregation, namely, the priesthood of all believers ("The officers of the Church publicly administer their offices only by virtue of *delegated powers*, and such administration remains under the supervision of the latter, COL. 4:7." [Brief Statement, §30]).²¹

Nevertheless, all Christians, as members of the priesthood of all believers, have been given the mandate and authority to baptize, meaning that they have the authority to baptize in an emergency or an extraordinary situation such as when there is an imminent danger of death (see "Holy Baptism in Cases of Emergency"

²¹ Within our Lutheran tradition, this is referred to as the authority of jurisdiction (AC 28).

found on p. 1023 in *LSB* and on the inside back cover of *LSCwE*).²²

Regardless of who performs the Baptism, when someone performs it in God's name and according to God's command, we should regard it as God Himself baptizing. "To be baptized in God's name is to be baptized not by human beings but by God himself. Although it is performed by human hands, it is nevertheless truly God's own act" (LC IV 10; KW 457).

How Is Teaching Carried Out in Connection with Baptism?

Jesus commissioned His disciples not only to baptize but also to teach all that He had commanded them. Baptism and teaching ought never be separated from each other. To empower His followers in their teaching task, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to recall for the disciples all that He had taught them. The apostles continually shared that teaching with the various early church communities both in person and by means of their letters. Guided by the Spirit, they wrote that teaching down in the writings of the New Testament for all the followers of Jesus.

It is clear from Matthew 28 and the entire New Testament that baptizing and teaching belong together. The church has always sought to hold Christ's command to baptize *and* teach together. But it has done so in various ways and, at times, with different sequences.

As noted earlier, in the early church's missionary setting, most Baptisms were adult Baptisms. In this situation, teaching often came first and was then followed by Baptism. Sometimes Baptism took place immediately after hearing the Gospel, while other times it took place a year or even three years after a person had been attending the service of the Word (e.g., the ancient catechumenate of the fourth century). As the Baptism of infants within Christian families became more common (and eventually the norm), the ordering shifted so that Baptism came first and instruction followed.

Over the years, the church has found it helpful to summarize the Scriptures by identifying a series of texts or topics that paint a picture of what life in this world now looks like for God's human creatures (the Ten Commandments), what the life of faith looks like for God's children (the Apostles' Creed), what our relationship

to our Father looks like in prayer (the Lord's Prayer), and what the life of a Christian within the church looks like (the Sacraments). Sometimes these summaries, or catechisms, have included additional resources as well, such as aids for helping people understand elements of worship or how to read the Scriptures (for example, see pp. 351–392 of the 2017 *LSCwE*).

The church came to mark and celebrate the fulfillment of these two tasks, baptizing and teaching, with a public rite known as "confirmation." This practice goes back to the time of the early church when Baptisms were often performed on the frontier of the Roman empire where no pastor or bishop was available. Later, a bishop or pastor would visit to "confirm" that the Baptism had taken place just as the apostles "confirmed" or attested to the validity of Baptisms in the Book of Acts (Acts 8:14–16).

Today, Lutherans typically regard confirmation as a ceremony by which the church publicly announces that the task of "baptizing and teaching" has been carried out with respect to these individuals, whether children or adults. In turn, children who are confirmed have opportunity to confess publicly with their own mouths the faith in which they have been baptized and instructed, just as their parents and sponsors had confessed for them when they were infants (see *LSB*, pp. 272–274).

By announcing that the child has been baptized and instructed, the church affirms that the child is now ready to continue with more in-depth study of the Scriptures and to carry on with learning as an adult what it means to live the life of a baptized Christian.

What Other Elements Might Be Present in the Service?

Down through history, the church has often included other elements in the baptismal service in order to express the richness of the Bible's teaching about Baptism. Our new beginning as followers of Jesus and the benefits of living under His reign have been celebrated by the church with a variety of rituals or traditions. They are not essential to Baptism but can serve an important teaching function.

The Naming of the Child. Some may wonder why the pastor sometimes asks in the baptismal service how the child is to be named, when (in most cases today) the child has already been given a name. In baptismal rites of the early church, both children and adults were often named (or renamed) at the time after a biblical character

²² The order of Baptism for use in emergency was also included in the predecessor hymnals of the LCMS: *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), 858; *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985), 213.

or other noteworthy Christian. This highlighted Baptism as an act or event of rebirth; as a result, the name given in Baptism came to be known as one's "Christian name."²³

The Sign of the Cross. In the rite of Baptism, the pastor makes the sign of the cross upon the forehead and heart of the one to be baptized. The purpose of this is to identify the individual as one who has been redeemed by Christ and now belongs to Christ. When Christians make the sign of the cross in prayer or at other times within the worship service, it is a repeated reminder of their Baptism and their baptismal identity in Christ.

The Presence and Role of Sponsors. In the early church, sponsors were responsible for instructing adult candidates for Baptism and then attesting to their readiness for Baptism. Similarly, in our day, when Baptism is often administered to infants too young to speak, sponsors confess the faith of the Christian Church. When a child is too young to answer for himself or herself, the sponsors speak on the child's behalf and as representatives of Christ's Body, the Church, renouncing Satan and expressing the Church's faith in the Triune God. As the sponsors answer the baptismal questions of renunciation and confession on behalf of the child, this expresses verbally the faith into which the child is to be raised and mentored. Hence the questions, "Do you believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth? Do you believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord ... ? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit ... ?"

The sponsors also pledge to help the newly baptized child to live as a Christian. They are to support and help the parents nurture the child as he or she grows so that the child may grasp and hold firmly to the promises of God throughout his or her life. To have sponsors play this important role alongside the parents is to bear witness to everyone that the child belongs to God's family, the Church, and not only to the parents and their immediate family.

At times, it may be appropriate to have someone stand and be present simply as a witness to the Baptism. This may occur when there is a desire to include a family member or friend who is not able to fulfil the role of a sponsor or make the promises that sponsors are asked to make. A witness's role or purpose is simply to attest that the child was indeed baptized should questions someday

arise about this. This is also the reason that it has been customary to give the parents a baptismal certificate that attests to the child's Baptism so that they may never be in doubt about whether they were properly baptized.

Renunciation of Satan and Confession of Christ. One of the most vivid ways the early church marked this new beginning as citizens in God's kingdom was by means of a renunciation of *former* citizenship. In the renunciation, one turns one's back upon life under Satan's rule and confesses that he now belongs to the God of Jesus Christ.

Baptismal Gown. Parents sometimes dress the infant in a baptismal gown to symbolize how the child is now clothed with Christ's righteousness. Alternatively, a baptismal garment is placed on the newly baptized infant (or adult). The use of the baptismal garment reflects several biblical texts and themes, such as Isaiah 61: "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness" (Is. 61:10; cf. ZECH. 3:3-4). It also highlights the New Testament imagery of Baptism as clothing (GAL. 3:27).

Baptismal Candle. During the Service of Holy Baptism, a candle, often lit from the Christ or paschal candle, may be presented as a gift to the baptized or to the parents or sponsors. The burning candle symbolizes the fact that Christ, the light of the world (JOHN 8:12), now lives within the person who was baptized. The candle may be lit to celebrate baptismal anniversaries throughout the child's life and to recall and rejoice in the many gifts and blessings of Baptism.

²³ In the baptismal service in *Lutheran Worship*, the parents of an infant were asked, "How is this child to be named?" The baptismal order in *LSB* does not include this question, but instead asks, "How are you named?" To which the parents or sponsors reply on the child's behalf.

CONCLUSION: JESUS' BAPTISMAL PROMISE TO US

In this document, we have explored how Baptism brings us under the reign of Christ as followers of Jesus. This transition into God's kingdom is frequently described in the New Testament in stark and dramatic terms: new birth, death and resurrection, rescue from the devil and safe passage through the final judgment. It is a life in which we are brought under the care and protection of God as our Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.

This is not to say that the Christian life as a baptized follower of Jesus is an easy life, at least not on this side of heaven. (Recall that life was not easy for Jesus Himself, nor for His disciples!) It is not a life in which God promises that we will prosper financially or always be healthy or that all of our relationships work out just as we intended. To the contrary, Christians (just like their non-Christian neighbors) live in a broken world, a world infected by sin and subjected by God to pain, frustration and futility because of sin (GEN. 3:16-19; ROM. 8:20-21).

At times, our lives are filled with successes, joys and hope as we reap the benefits of living in God's creation, which He blesses and for which He still graciously cares. "In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness" (ACTS 14:16-17). We see God providing nourishing sunshine and rain to both the righteous and the unrighteous (MATT. 5:45).

At other times, our lives might be characterized by disappointments, setbacks and inexplicable tragedies. These are times when it may become very difficult to trust that God will keep His promises to us. These are times when we want God to give us clear and immediate answers to our questions and good, sensible reasons for His actions (or His apparent inaction). These are times when there may seem to be no point in believing in God and we may be tempted to reject Him altogether. In this sense, life is often more tragic than "comedic" (to use Shakespearian terms) — things don't always work out by the end of the day.

This is why baptized and believing Christians live by faith — faith in Christ's promise and not by the proof of our eyes. We trust Christ to keep His promises, no matter what we see, feel or experience. And so the Christian life is a journey of living out that venture of faith day by day. One who lives by faith can live without having every question answered or every puzzle in life resolved. Such (God-given!) baptismal faith enables us to navigate the tragedies of life and not be crushed by the unexpected events of life or threats to our faith that inevitably come our way. When we fall by failing to trust God, we repent by renouncing our desire for control and embracing God's baptismal promises to us again. When tragedies occur, we lament (as God's people have always done) and take our complaints to Him. We can live with the contingencies of life (good and bad) because we live by faith, a faith that will be vindicated only when we are raised from the dead on the Last Day.

In addition to all the struggles of life in a fallen world, the devil strives with particular rage and spite against those baptized into Christ. Luther urged that pastors and people approach Baptism with the utmost seriousness for this reason: “Remember, therefore, that it is no joke to take sides against the devil and not only to drive him away from the little child [in Baptism], but to burden the child with such a mighty and lifelong enemy” (AE 53:102). Thanks be to God that the Christian has both the confidence that comes from saying, “I am baptized,” and also is able to confess all sins and failures and receive the assurance of God in the pastor’s voice in the absolution: “I forgive you all your sins.”²⁴

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father and of
the Son and of the Holy Spirit And behold,
I am with you always, to the end of the age”
(MATT. 28:19–20).

²⁴ So, Luther, commenting on Gen. 35:2, writes: “But if we believed that God is speaking to us through parents, pastors, and ministers of the Word, we should feel our hearts inflamed by a wonderful joy. For we should glory as follows, saying: ‘I am baptized.’ By whom? Was it not by a pastor? By no means, but by the Holy Spirit. I have been absolved by the Holy Spirit, by God Himself. Why, then, should I be afraid? Before whom should I be alarmed? Why should I be troubled about my sin?” (*Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 31–37*, AE 6:225.)

ADDENDUM: OTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT BAPTISM

1. *Is it acceptable to use different “Trinitarian formulas” when baptizing?*

No. In recent decades, some churches have decided to use baptismal language that is considered gender inclusive. For that reason (or perhaps others), they may perform a Baptism by saying, “I baptize you in the name of the Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.”

While those terms (and others that may sometimes be used) may be Trinitarian in their pattern, they are more titles or descriptions of God than they are names of God. Moreover, they could easily lead one to speak in a modalistic manner that denies the three persons (e.g., God is only one person but plays three roles much as one actor might play three different characters in a play).

Even if the intention is to reference the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, such formulas raise unnecessary questions, concerns and doubts for the one being baptized by departing from the words given us by our Lord. As Christ’s followers, we are bound to remain with the words that Christ gave us to use. We therefore baptize using those words in which the pastor repeats the very words of Christ: “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

2. *Why are Baptisms normally conducted in the church?*

Baptism is normally conducted as a public act in a congregation as the church gathers in worship rather than in private ceremonies restricted only to the immediate family of the one baptized. The reasons for this are quite clear: Baptism makes us members of the Church, which is the *community* of those who believe in Christ, members of God’s own family as His adopted children and members of the Body of Christ. One’s entry into this new, eternal family is cause for the whole people of God to celebrate and not simply for the parents and other relatives or close friends.

(This is not to say, however, that Baptism cannot occasionally be performed in a private setting for various reasons. And certainly, Baptism administered in cases of emergency will, by necessity, take place outside the context of the regular service.)

3. *What is the relationship between Baptism and faith?*

In Baptism, God gives us His Word, a Word that bestows the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection. “God has given us His word on it!” But the promises of God’s Word seek faith and are only embraced by faith. This is what we mean when we say *sola fide*. Not to believe those promises is like throwing them back into God’s face with the words, “I don’t believe you!”

The key thing to remember is that faith is the means by which we receive and embrace God’s promises. The Lutheran Confessions put it simply: “Faith is the desire for and the reception of the promise of Christ” (Ap IV 305–306; KW 165). But the activity of believing or trusting is not, *in and of itself*, the cause of our salvation. As Luther says in the Large Catechism, “Everything depends upon the word and commandment of God. ... For my faith does not make baptism; rather, it receives baptism” (LC Baptism 53; KW 463).

4. *When and how does Baptism create faith?*

With regard to when God creates faith, we might revisit Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus regarding our new birth by the Holy Spirit. There Jesus states, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (JOHN 3:8). Picking up on this verse, the Augsburg Confession notes that the Holy Spirit creates faith “where and when it pleases God in those who hear the gospel.” That would include Baptism, where God has connected His Gospel Word to water (AC V 3; KW 41).

With regard to how He creates faith, we can say this much: God does not force someone to believe. We can also say this: God does not leave it to our decision (as our will is bound by sin). One of the best descriptions of the creation of faith that keeps these two truths in proper tension is found in Article 2 of the Formula of Concord:

Although God does not force human beings in such a way that they must become godly [believers] ... nonetheless God the Lord draws those people whom he wants to convert and does so in such a way that an enlightened understanding is fashioned out of a darkened understanding and an obedient will is fashioned out of a rebellious will. Scripture calls this creating a new heart [PSALM 51:12]. (FC SD II 60; KW 555)

Another way one might express this is that through His water and Word, God thaws and melts our icy hearts until they become warm, fleshly, beating hearts once again.

5. Why does an adult need to be baptized if he or she is already a believer?

A person who asks this question likely needs to be (gently) helped to see that this is the wrong question to ask. Baptism is not something that “we have to do.” Rather, our Lord is rich and generous in His gifts. He gives us His promises in the spoken Word (preaching, absolution), in the visible and tangible word (Baptism, Lord’s Supper), and in the written Word (the texts of Scripture). Therefore, we baptize on the basis of Christ’s command and promise. Baptism’s promises are rich: Not only are our sins forgiven (ACTS 2:38), but we receive the Holy Spirit (ACTS 2:39), and we are made members of His Body, the Church (1 COR. 12:13).

6. When can or should adult converts be baptized?

Can or should we baptize adults soon after they have believed the Gospel or wait until they have undergone a course in the catechism? Those who are able to receive instruction are normally baptized after receiving instruction in the main articles of the Christian faith. (See 2017 LSCwE, Q. 305.)

However, we must not turn faith into an intellectual achievement, with Baptism as its reward. God’s promise seeks faith. And faith, in turn, desires and receives God’s promise (Ap IV 48; KW 128). As God’s promise spoken to an individual may elicit and create

faith, faith, in turn, embraces the promise wherever it is offered and given ... including in Baptism. Therefore, it may be appropriate to baptize an adult who has recently come to faith in response to his or her request for Baptism. The account of Philip’s encounter with an Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 provides an example of a Baptism that follows almost immediately at the time of conversion. Philip first instructed and then baptized the eunuch at his request on the same day (ACTS 8:36–38). Thus, some might ask why our normal practice is to catechize adults more fully before baptizing them. The answer is simply that our Lord combines Baptism and teaching in Matthew 28 as He explains how we are to make disciples. We should never separate what He joins together. Adult catechesis or teaching of new converts should not be viewed primarily as an intellectual process, but instead as one in which baptismal faith and life are succinctly summarized for the newly converted person by explaining the commandments, the faith we confess (the Creed), prayer (the Lord’s Prayer), Baptism, Absolution and the Lord’s Supper.

7. What are the biblical and theological reasons for baptizing infants?

In a word, Jesus died and rose in order to be their gracious Lord as well. By Baptism, they are taken out of their previous life as aliens and outsiders and brought under Jesus’ protection and blessing.

Even an infant stands in great need of such rescue: “The Word of God also teaches that we are all conceived and born sinful and are under the power of the devil until Christ claims us as His own. We would be lost forever unless delivered from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation” (Rite of Holy Baptism, LSB, p. 268; see PS. 51:5; EPH. 2:1–3; ACTS 26:18; COL. 1:13). Jesus Himself has commanded: “Go therefore and make disciples of *all* nations, baptizing them ... [and] teaching them” (MATT. 28:19–20) — an all-encompassing mandate which excludes no age group.

When considering infant Baptism, the key questions are: What is Baptism, according to Scripture? What does Baptism actually do? Here is what the Bible says about what Baptism is and does: “He saved us ... by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (TITUS 3:5–6). “Baptism ... now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through

the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 PETER 3:21).

The central question of the entire debate can be expressed in a straightforward manner. Is Baptism primarily God’s promise to us or is Baptism primarily our promise to God? If Baptism is God’s promise to adopt us and to be our heavenly Father, there is no reason that God cannot make a promise to an infant as well as to an adult. It is analogous to parents who adopt an infant child. They promise to care for the child apart from that child’s ability to assent. By contrast, if Baptism is my promise to God, whereby I promise to be faithful to Him, then it would make sense (from the standpoint of human reason) not to baptize until someone is capable of making such a promise. Obviously, such a view of Baptism fundamentally alters its character from that of grace and gift (Gospel) to that of human assent, effort and responsibility (Law). This makes all the difference!

Luther expresses this nicely in the Large Catechism. “Further, we say, we do not put the main emphasis on whether the person baptized believes or not, for in the latter case Baptism does not become invalid. Everything depends upon the Word and commandment of God” (LC IV 52; KW 463). “Baptism does not become invalid if it is not properly received or used, as I have said, for it is not bound to our faith but to the Word” (LC IV 54; KW 463).

8. Are infants or people who have mental or emotional limitations capable of believing the promises of Baptism?

Yes. When raising such a question, however, we must be careful not to shift our focus away from what *God* does in Baptism to the question of whether *we* (as adults or children) are intellectually, volitionally or emotionally capable of believing. When that happens, anthropology and psychology may be allowed to shape our theology of Baptism. This mistake can happen even with regard to our perception of adult Baptism, if we see Baptism as little more than the outward response to an inward reality. It can also happen with infants, if we see everything as dependent on our ability to determine whether or not they have faith immediately upon being baptized. Instead, we must keep God’s command and promise front and center in Baptism.

Having said that, it may be helpful to distinguish between two aspects of faith, namely, faith as *fides directa* and faith as *fides reflexa*. The former refers to

our orientation toward God that is characterized by trust and confidence. The latter refers to our knowledge of God’s work and agreement with His words and promises.

With respect to God, faith is an orientation toward God whereby we receive and live from the gifts of God — whether we are conscious of them or not (*fides directa*). Thus the psalmist exclaims, “Yet you are he who took me from the womb; you made me trust you at my mother’s breasts” (Ps. 22:9). This is a faith or confidence that constitutes a direct dependence or reliance upon God just as infants depend upon their parents. In this respect, Jesus told His disciples to imitate the faith of little children (MATT. 18:3).

But with respect to how we perceive ourselves or as we reflect on faith and study how we experience faith, we may well perceive and analyze aspects of faith that can be described in intellectual, emotional and volitional terms. And we may experience growth in our faith over time so that things about God’s promises that we did not understand intellectually when we were young we now grasp better (*fides reflexa*).

To maintain that infants are given faith in Baptism does not imply that they intellectually grasp all that this entails (knowledge) or volitionally acknowledge it as true (assent). But they trust the one who holds them. And as they grow, they gradually become more aware and mindful of all that comes with the promises of God.

As Luther notes, “We bring the child with the intent and hope that it may believe, and we pray God to grant it faith. But we do not baptize on this basis, but solely on the command of God” (LC IV 57; KW 464). For this reason, we presume that the Spirit creates faith in infants because God is able to do what He promises (ROMANS 4). In a similar vein, Paul declares, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (GAL. 3:27). It is hard to imagine how one could be clothed with Christ without faith.

9. What if the baby of Christian parents dies before it is baptized?

When this happens, Christian parents have wonderful reasons to hope for the salvation of their child. They know who their God is: the One who sent His own Son to die on the cross to redeem and save little children, no less than others (2 COR. 5:19). The all-loving God loves their little one! This loving God did not institute Baptism as something *one has to do to*

be saved (a work of the Law); rather, He gave Baptism as *a means of salvation* (a gift of the Gospel). This is why Christian parents bring their babies for Baptism as soon as possible: because of the clear promises of God even for children (ACTS 2:39), who certainly also need a Savior from sin and death (ROM. 6:23). Yet the absence of Baptism, *in itself*, does not cause someone to be lost. We know that God has formed this child in the womb and truly desires it to be saved. In fact, the child of Christian parents has very likely heard God's Word of Christ — even while still in the womb — and the Holy Spirit uses the Word to create saving faith. That is, the child may actually have believed in Christ before Baptism (PS. 22:9–10; LUKE 1:15, 41, 44). What is more, Christian parents have surely prayed for their child already long before its birth, and we know that for Jesus' sake our God answers prayers (JOHN 15:16; 16:23). Do not doubt that God has heard your prayer!

When a child dies before Baptism, the Lutheran pastor will earnestly seek to bring to grieving parents comfort and care from the Lord. He will always be ready to assure Christian parents that they may have hope that their child has been in the loving care of their gracious God, the Father of our Savior, Jesus Christ.²⁵

²⁵ This answer applies to parents who earnestly desired to baptize their children and did not despise the saving promises of Baptism. It should therefore not be misunderstood as a denial of either the efficacy or general necessity of infant Baptism or of the concerns raised in the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration Article XII, paragraphs 11–13. In condemning Anabaptist errors, three of the errors the Formula lists have to do with infant Baptism:

2. That unbaptized children are not sinners in God's sight but instead are righteous and innocent and therefore in their innocence are saved without baptism, which they do not need. They thus deny and reject the entire teaching of original sin and everything connected with it.

3. That children should not be baptized until they attain the use of their reason and can confess their faith themselves.

4. That the children of Christians, because they are born to Christian and believing parents, are holy and God's children without and before baptism. Therefore they do not regard infant baptism as very important nor do they advocate it, against the expressed words of God's promise, which only extends to those who keep his covenant and do not despise it (GEN. 17:4–8, 19–21) (FC SD XII 11–13; KW 657).

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

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